

Jonas M. Poweshiek

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JONAS M. POWESHIEK

An Autobiography

Altoona, Iowa, March 26, 1936.

My grandmother headed a group of Mesquakies who made the trip on foot from their reservation, provided by the government, in Kansas in 1853 to their old home along Iowa River in Tama County.

One year later, September 16, 1854, my father James Poweshiek was born.

In 1882 a group of Pottawattamie Indians came up to Mesquakie reservation to bring four drums to be presented to Mesquakie group who believed in a worship called drum dance. While this group of Pottawatamie Indians were here, my father met a maiden of that group and they immediately fell in love, and marriage followed later of the same year. They had ten children, five still living.

I was born in a regular Mesquakie wickiup covered with woven cat-tail reeds, January 1, 1895.

The name that my father and his elders, being a bear clan, conferred upon me was Me-shi-ma-ta-quā, which means monster bear. All my relations as far back as before Columbus discovered America belong to the bear clan.

I wish to state at this time that so many white people have a mistaken idea as to how Indians name their offspring. I have read in books, papers and have heard any number of people say that soon after birth an Indian mother gives her child a name by the first object she happens to see, whether it be an animal or anything. I know a number of different tribes and their way of naming their children is not by what the mother happens to see soon after giving birth. Their ways are similar to ours, by clans.

During my infancy my mother always told me that I was a good baby, by that she meant that I didn't cry very much. I remember incidents of my childhood days when I was four years old.

My folks had trouble keeping me home because I would wander off into the woods and fields looking for birds. I would be gone



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From a photograph by Hostetter, September, 1936.

at nights trying to catch birds in their nests by climbing the trees.

Just before vacation one summer in the month of June my father took me to school in Toledo, Iowa, a government boarding school. They thought I would be safe there from my wanderings and they kept me in the basement room where I couldn't get out according to their idea, however I managed to crawl through a narrow window and went up into the timber where I found some young pigs, and I killed one.

On account of my being in school for the first time and in the month of June, the superintendent gave me the name June, which I used until I went to school at Chilocco, Oklahoma.

My grandfather and grandmother lived about half a mile north of our wickiup. He was a very old man, he had a scaffold and arbor some distance from their home. It was his custom to take a rest and nap certain part of the day where no one would disturb him. It has been told of me by him and my father, I also well remember that I would go over where he was sleeping and poke him in the ribs with a long stick and run into the weeds to hide and continue this until he sat up. He would make a funny noise whenever I poked him in the ribs. This took place between the age of four and five.

All of the Mesquakies at this time lived in wickiups and bark houses in the summer time.

It was their custom to move to winter quarters, that being in the timber back of a hill out of the wind, and in the summer time they would move to open places for more breeze and where their garden spots were.

I was gradually broken into going to school when I was about eight years old at the government school in Toledo.

It was difficult for the teachers to try to make us understand English. It was equally difficult for us to learn anything because the minute we left the schoolroom we began talking our own language, so it must have taken time and patience on the part of the teachers.

The older Indians were bitter against the schools and discouraged those that were going to school.

Many of the children would run away from school and go back home.

I myself tried that two or three times, but each time my father would take me right back because it was his duty, being a government police; he was appointed government police when the school first opened in 1895. He held that position until 1913.

The Indians as a whole hated him for being a police.

The older Indians would call the school children mo-ko-ma-na, "white man."

However I managed to grasp a few English words and when I was thirteen years old I conceived the idea that if I was to learn anything I would have to go away some place where I couldn't hear my language, then I would have to learn English language.

I had heard of a school in Oklahoma which is still operating and is called Chilocco Indian Agricultural School. I talked and pleaded with my parents to send me there, they kept refusing me, I kept begging them with tears in my eyes. Their main objection was that the school was too far away and that I would get lonesome. That fall in September, 1908, they finally consented for me to go. My father took me to the agency and told the Indian agent to send me to Chilocco school. I signed up for three years; my transportation and expenses were paid by the government.

I was happy as a lark to get to take a long train ride and see new country.

I enjoyed the ride very much because it was my first ride. Quite a number of Indians came to the station to see me off. Upon my arrival at Chilocco there was a school hack there that took me to the school which was one mile from the station. Chilocco school land covers over eleven thousand acres. The government schools are operated under strict military rules. The boys are arranged in companies same as in the army. We lined up to answer roll calls for meals, school, church and everything. They had captains and other officers for each company. I was placed in Company C.

I will relate my first experience at this school, my first Sunday at Chilocco. I had never been inside of a church before that I could remember and I never knew there were different denominations. Soon after breakfast a bugle sounded (which was church call), the boys began to go outside to form in their respective

companies. I of course knew by this time where my place was. The sergeant called the roll, afterwards the major made some kind of a command and the boys began to fall out of line to form into different groups. I couldn't figure out why they were doing that so I remained standing where I was, not knowing which group to get into. The captain finally stepped up to me and said, "Say, are you a Catholic?" I thought to myself I might as well say yes and get into some group, so I said, "Yes." He told me to get in that group (pointing), then they marched us off to church. I just followed the rest and did what ever they did, falling down on our knees now and then. I stuck to that church all thru my first year, and I didn't seem to gain anything, not knowing what it was all about because the priest would talk in Latin all the time.

After school was out I went home for vacation and on the streets of Tama one day I met one of the Missionary women. She talked to me and asked me how I liked the school, and if I went to church regularly. I told her I did. She wanted to know what church I went to, I said, "Catholic." She threw up her hands and said you are not a Catholic, you are a Presbyterian; next time you go back to school you go to Presbyterian church. That is how I became a Presbyterian.

During my first year at Chilocco my mail was being continually sent to girls quarters thinking it was for a girl. Boys would tease me about the name June. I didn't like it very well and one day one of the girls in my class, a Pawnee girl that didn't know my name very well, called me Jonas, and it struck me right then that that would be the name I would adopt and I discarded the name June. I notified all my correspondents of the change and any one else that asked me my name I told them it was Jonas, and that is how I got that name.

I remained at Chilocco school my full three-year term.

It takes longer to get an education in the government schools because you are required to work half a day and the other half I was in school.

You have a choice of any trade you wish to learn. Not knowing any useful trades I picked out painting, just because my older brother was a painter. I worked hard and studied hard to learn all I could. My first experience with paint and brush,

I was sent out to paint a barn with red paint. I was given a brush, a bucket of red paint and a 12 foot ladder. I had never used a ladder. I started on one end of it and I stood the ladder little too leaning and when I got up to the top it kicked out at the bottom down I went with paint all over me when it splashed up. I was truly a red man then. I spent the rest of the forenoon getting the paint off from my face & hair. At the end of three years I had mastered the art of painting, both interior and exterior work, hanging paper, and sign work, and I was awarded an industrial certificate which I still prize.

In the fall of 1911 I signed up for three years to attend school at Haskell Institute, Lawrence, Kansas. I had to pick out some other trade then. I picked out electrician's trade. For some reason I didn't seem to like Haskell, however I remained for one year and a half. For several months before going on home I worked in Kansas City, Scarret Building. This was in the spring of 1913. My mother died at that time and no one knew where to locate me, so my mother was buried without me seeing her.

After I got home I talked with the agent and I told him frankly that I didn't like Haskell, that I wanted to get a transfer to go to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. The agent agreed with me and he made out a transfer which was made O. K. I was glad to get to take another long ride and see more new country. I was the first Mesquakie to leave the reservation for Carlisle. I left Tama September 13, 1913, for Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

I wrote and told some friends in Pittsburgh that I was passing thru there on a certain day, so they met me there and showed me around the smoky city. They loaded me up with fruits and candy.

I had a thrill going thru the famous horse shoe curve and thru the tunnels.

After arriving at Carlisle I took a street car which went right out to the school entrance. I hadn't gone very far on the school grounds when I met a girl who spoke to me and called me by name to my surprise. She happened to be a Chippewa girl from Michigan that I went to school with at Toledo, Iowa, at my beginning. We talked for some time and I managed to get a lot of information about the school. I went directly to the

superintendent's office where they took my name and a room was assigned to me in the large boys' quarters. The school itself is real interesting, it has such a historic background. All the buildings were built by George Washington's prisoners, the Hessians, and were occupied by Washington's soldiers.

I wanted to continue the trade I had started at Haskell to become an electrician, but I was told that it was all filled up now, that I had to pick out some other trade. I didn't know what other trade to take so the tailoring trade was suggested to me, that it was clean and easy trade. I consented to it and started on that trade which I liked very much as time went on.

During the summer months I took advantage of the "outing system" they had, and I was placed on a farm in Newtown, Pennsylvania, to earn some spending money. The following summer I went out again, this time near Trenton, New Jersey. I spent two summers at this place.

I liked tailoring very much. We made all the uniforms for the boys at school. I had the record of making a pair of pants in three hours and a half. All I lacked in getting a certificate for tailoring was in drafting.

I finally went home for a vacation. I was in Tama two weeks when I decided to go to Oklahoma where my older brother was living. He had married a Euche girl at Depew, Oklahoma. The United States had declared war on Germany. While I was in Oklahoma I went to Tulsa and enlisted in the army June 2, 1917, and I was shipped along with other boys to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, where we were sworn in on June 5. It was quite an experience for me and I wanted to go across so bad. It was more of a trip and to see how it was to be in the war that I was anxious to go. My training at the government schools relieved me from a lot of hard training that the rookies were put through. I was put in with the regulars in a few days and in two weeks I was made a first class private.

While I was at Depew where my brother lived a group of Sacs and Foxes came over for a religious meeting that was put on, and among that group was an ex-Carlisle student that I grew very fond of who happen to be Ruth Moore.

After spending three months at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, we were shipped to Fort Worth, Texas. Our outfit which was First Okla-

homa Infantry was busted up and thrown with the Texas rookies in One Hundred and Forty-second Infantry, Thirty-sixth Division.

When I was at Chilocco I was in Company C, at Haskell I was in Company C, at Carlisle I was in Company C, in First Oklahoma Infantry I was in Company C, in One Hundred and Forty-second Infantry, Thirty-sixth Division, I was in Company C. I was later transferred to Remount Depot, Quarter Master Corps, I was still in Company C there. I remained with this outfit until I got my discharge out of the army May 1, 1919.

During my time with the Thirty-sixth Division and with the Quarter Master Corps I made use of my tailoring trade. I was provided with a shop where I could alter and make clothes for the boys.

I made two trips to Tama while I was stationed at Fort Worth.

The second time I was in Tama the Armistice was signed. I wired back to my captain for an extension of my furlough for ten more days.

Ruth Moore was going to school in Oklahoma City then, and I had the pleasure of visiting her there at different times.

After my discharge from the army, a friend of mine and I went in partnership to go into putting up a tailor shop at Ranger, Texas, a new booming oil town. We were there five months and sold out. He went to the oil fields to work and I worked at my other trade, painting. I finally went home in December of that year. In 1920 I went to Cedar Rapids to work at painting. I worked all summer. After it got too cold to work and work slacked up I went to Oklahoma in November. On November 20, 1920, Ruth Moore and I got married there in Cushing, Oklahoma. In January, 1921, we went to Tama to make our home and that spring I went to work again with the same firm in Cedar Rapids. I worked there until 1924 when I began to work there in Toledo, doing all the painting at the agency.

In 1923 we lost our first baby boy.

Latter part of January 1925 I was hired by Hon. E. R. Harlan to work for him in the Historical Department. I have worked for many different people, but Mr. Harlan is the best boss I ever worked for and I have been with him since 1925.

During this period of time Ruth and I have been blessed with four children. Two boys and two girls. We have three that are in school who are making good; next fall the fourth one will start to school. He is five years old, now, a namesake of Mr. Harlan, Edgar Harlan Poweshiek.

DIVORCES

The last legislature in one act divorced some twenty people, while this (at least the House of Representatives) was declared by a majority of about one half that the legislature does not possess the power, and by a unanimous vote decided that it was inexpedient to legislate upon the subject, which we think a legal, righteous, and expedient conclusion. For in this new country our legislature can untie more knots in one session than all the priests can tie during the recess. Let this matter go to the courts where it more properly belongs.—*Bloomington* (Muscatine) *Herald*, Bloomington, Iowa, January 12, 1844. (In the Newspaper Division of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.)

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